

We Get To Choose

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Today, I want to explore the concept of choice with you. I want to look at choice within the context of our Unitarian Universalist faith. I'm hopeful the subject will be of some interest, as UUs are known to be independent thinkers, the kind of folks that read ahead in order to decide whether or not to sing the words.

We are a fortunate people. We're fortunate to be part of a faith movement that places great value on individual choice. We have no creeds that all are obligated to profess in order to be accorded membership. We have no denominational hierarchy that places significant demands on its congregations. While some would prefer it otherwise, congregations seem to enjoy their independence.

Within the UU world, we get to choose to call ourselves a church, society or fellowship; a denomination or a movement. We are theist, deist, humanist, pagans, atheist, Catholics, Jews and Christians, and more. We get to choose the nature of our Sunday Service. There is no proscribed liturgy, we're not required to preach from the common lectionary.

In short, this faith movement not only allows for, but in many ways demands choice.

We, those of us here, and the vast majority of those we associate with are very fortunate indeed. We, are the privileged. We have the luxury of innumerable choices. Every day of our lives, we have a wide array of choices available to us.

This full bouquet of choices come to us not because we, as individuals, are good people and have earned the right to have choices, but because of our station in life. Numerous choices are available to us simply by virtue of our national origin, our class, race, age, gender, education or sexual orientation. For a number of reasons, we have an advantage in society. Not all have such an array of choices.

Those in jail have very few opportunities to choose. Those in abusive relationships often feel they have little or no room for genuine choice. The very poor are often limited to the choice of putting food on the table or clothes on their kid's backs. And too many of our elderly must choose between daily necessities and filling their medical prescriptions. Many in our society, more in fact than we'd like to think, have very limited options, but that's not the case for most of us. We get to make many choices, often little choices, like what to wear today. We get to decide whether we'll go out to dinner or eat in. We choose

to buy this or that at the grocery store and unlike those without transportation, we choose which store we'll go to. All of these are choices that often don't feel like choices at all.

We choose to speak or to remain silent. We choose what words we are going to use. We choose to tell the whole story or only that part we want known. And sometimes, we only recognize the choices we've made in retrospect. We make more choices in any given minute, than I suspect most of us have any awareness of.

Some decisions are big and we spend a good deal of time thinking about them. Who will we marry? What neighborhood will we live in, where will the kids go to school? Will we buy a new car or have this one repaired.

The point is, we make choices all the time and under all sorts of circumstances. And generally, we are happy to have such options. Given that for the most part, we are blessed with innumerable options, the question arises, SO WHAT. So what, that we have the option for so many choices. Do our choices really make a difference? Are our choices benign?

We can all agree, some choices are more important than others. The choice to go to college or not, has got to be more important than which pair of Nike's we want to buy. The choice to put money aside for a rainy day has got to be more important than where we might go out to dinner this evening. Some choices truly make a difference in our lives.

But does that mean that only the big decisions are important? Does that mean that the vast majority of the decisions we make, in any given day, in any given moment are not also important?

I've come to believe that the myriad decisions we make in a day, an hour, are infinitely more important than we recognize or understand. Big people, people of stature in our society, have the ability to build another up or to cut them down in some way, often very subtly. People with stature, can encourage or support others to be a better human being, or injure their self-esteem. The simple decision to say or not to say Good Morning may allow someone the opportunity to feel seen, to feel like they are worthy of being noticed, deserve to be seen. It may make a difference in someone's day, in someone's life.

As you may know, Maggie and I lived in Washington DC for a year so I could do an internship at All Souls Unitarian Church. One of the downsides of short-term relocations is that you don't get to bring your primary care physician with you. Consequently, when

you need the slightest medical care, you may find the emergency room is the only option available to you.

As I sat in the waiting room, in the middle of the night, for what seemed like hours, I had what I sometimes call a “ministerial moment” or an “authenticity check”... looking at yourself in the mirror. That’s a moment that doesn’t necessarily require any intervention, but one that calls to attention, the difference between talking the talk and *walking* the talk.

As I sat next to a man I presumed to be homeless or mentally imbalanced, or both, I realized that my nostrils were not happy... they were not in great pain, but they certainly were not happy. I was glad there was an empty seat between us. Knowing I might be waiting for some time, I had brought a book with me. But I found myself being distracted by this man. Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I’d see him twitch a leg or an arm or his entire body might shiver. I tried hard not to be bothered by his behavior, but I was not successful.

At one point he became fully engrossed in what I thought was odd behavior. He had emptied his pockets onto the chair between us and was sorting through it’s contents. He had a surprising amount of paper. Some of it looked liked receipts and others of it seemed to be business-card size. After handling many of the pieces individually, he placed them in a neat pile, placed that pile onto some newsprint –where it came from I’ll never know-- and started to fold it all into a neat package. By this time, I was reading my book at the rate of about seven words per minute. I was distracted!

In truth, I must confess, I was not comfortable sitting next to this man. On several occasions I had to remind myself that he was just a man, actively involved, in living his life. He had not said or done anything to me that should give me any concern for my own well-being. He simply was behaving in a manner *I* found odd. In other words, I had to consciously tell myself that all this was MY problem; this was a real live person, a fellow human being, *someone with inherent worth and dignity*.

I had to be intentional in order to recognize and understand that he had every right to be where he was and to act as he was acting. He was hurting no-one. I had to remind myself to acknowledge his humanity. I had to remind myself to pay more attention to his humanity than I did to his smell and odd behavior. It was work. It wasn’t easy. His humanity was not obvious to me.

Now I don’t know whether he noticed *me* noticing *him*. I hope he was so engaged in his life, that he simply didn’t see me. I hope he did not see **the me** that I saw. I sincerely hope that he forgave me for not speaking to him, during the hours we shared.

That event lived with me for several days, it lives with me now. It got under my skin. Since then, I've looked at it from several different angles. When I relive the events of that evening I feel the embarrassment and shame of my reactions. On the other hand, I've been able to see it as *simply* an event in my life, in which I behaved in a very human fashion. But however I look at it, I come up against the need to forgive myself, for my humanity.

I never spoke to that man that evening. Perhaps it was one of those simple but important choices we make. The choice I made, was certainly a teaching moment, an authenticity check, and I believe it was important.

The choice that was made that evening brought home the fact, that walking the talk of our faith, ain't so easy. That choice, made clear to me, that the **TALK** of inherent worth and dignity, of acceptance of one another, compassion in human relations, **SOUNDS** so very lovely. That evening made clear to me, it's easier said than done.

Like I said, I never spoke to that man that evening. But I certainly interacted with him, he affected me...in my mind, my psyche, my spirit...but not in my heart. My heart, did not want to dance with him.

How often, I wonder, is that true for us in our collective lives? How often have we found ourselves in a situation... where we simply, do not want to dance? Maybe it's in the grocery store, or in the boss's office, maybe it's in our own kitchen...or fellowship, and our heart just doesn't want to dance with that person. Even when we are not aware we are making a choice... We choose.

Several days after my midnight encounter, I was telling a friend about my experience and how it brought me face to face with myself. In the telling of my story, it occurred to me...more than once in my life, I was him. More than once, others have been uncomfortable with me. Sometimes because I expressed a belief they did not share. Some have been uncomfortable because I wanted to hear and sing different music than they, or because I insisted on expressing my theology—while in church! And there have been times that others were uncomfortable having a black person in their presence. I wonder if they were aware of making a choice?

Maybe we don't have much control over what it is that makes us uncomfortable. We may not even know *why* we're uncomfortable. But our UU faith requires, our beliefs and values require that we must take responsibility for our own reactions. We must hold ourselves accountable for the choices we make, even if only in retrospect.

We are a fortunate people, fortunate to be part of a faith movement that places great value on individual choice. We have no creeds that all are obligated to profess in order to be accorded membership. We get to choose what kind of fellowship we want to be.

We get to choose. **We** make choices. And sometimes, those choices *are* important. Sometimes those choices do indeed matter!

Amen